

Alumni Profile

BY HARRY BOSK

"I never thought it would work," comments Gerson Mehlman, partner of Mehlman & Greenblatt, LLC, about the concept of legal temps. He was one of the first attorneys to use Attorneys Per Diem, a legal temp business, founded in 1991 by University of Maryland School of Law graduates Laura Black '88 and Mark Neumann '88. Mehlman believed that legal temps would be a business fad useful during tough economic times but superfluous when business was good.

As it turned out, the prospects for the legal temp business have been good during booms and busts. Mehlman still calls Laura Black for temporary help even though Attorneys Per Diem no longer exists. In 1995 it became a part of Special Counsel, the largest legal temp firm in the country and a subsidiary of Modis Professional Services, a global provider of information technology and professional services with revenues of approximately \$1.7 billion in 1998. Black now serves as Special Counsel's Chief Executive Officer and President and Mark Neumann is its Chief Operating Officer. Together they have become national leaders in a relatively new business enterprise, one that Black believes will



Laura Black

continue to expand as she seeks new ways to grow the business.

Similar to many successful entrepreneurs, Black started Attorneys Per Diem because her own personal experience enabled her to see a niche in the marketplace. After graduating from Maryland, she practiced law for two years as an associate for Whiteford, Taylor and Preston. She entered law school 10 years after graduating from Emory University and after working as an executive for an apparel company. The day she stepped across the stage to receive her law diploma she was the mother of two young children and pregnant with her third.

As a young mother, she found it difficult to balance the demands placed on new associates and new parents. She wanted to continue to practice law, but she also

wanted more personal flexibility. So she left the firm and hired herself out on a temporary basis to attorneys to help draft memos, prepare legal documents and assist with research. Soon, she found there was more work than she could handle.

Black realized she had discovered an opportunity. A legal temp business did not exist in Baltimore. There were a few sprinkled throughout the United States, but none of them seemed to know about each other. Unlike today, there was no national network for legal temps.

Enter law school classmate Mark Neumann, who had served with Black on the *Law Review* and was an associate at Frank, Bernstein, Conaway. After learning about Black's success as a legal temp, he called her to suggest discussing a partnership. Although they

had scheduled a meeting for the following week, he called back that same day because he saw no reason to wait. His desire to forge ahead confirmed for her that Neumann had the drive she needed for her business partner. The next day he was looking for office space.

As the first legal temp service in Baltimore, Attorneys Per Diem faced the challenge of being accepted by a legal community characterized as conservative. "People would say, 'We don't use temporary attorneys,' Neumann recalls, "and we'd have to say 'Of course, you don't, they've never been available.'"

Their persuasiveness, adroit marketing skills and business savvy paid off. Attorneys Per Diem grew. The timing was right. 1991 was a difficult business cycle for law firms. Downsizing and mergers created a receptive marketplace. Layoffs and a tight job market for law school graduates generated a large pool of talented attorneys from which Attorneys Per Diem could draw.

Black also attributes the company's success to a pragmatic perspective. "A law firm is a business that looks at the bottom line. A firm's biggest expense is its payroll. In the past, salaries were always a fixed cost, but Attorneys Per Diem made it possible to take that fixed cost and turn it into a variable cost," she explains.

PHOTO BY STEVE SPARTANA

a Temporary Solution

This gave law firms more flexibility to accept new business and make hiring decisions.

Black recognized how the quality of placements Attorneys Per Diems made would affect the legal community's acceptance of their business. "We made our reputation on the candidates we sent," she says. Accordingly, Attorneys Per Diem offered clients a no-fee guarantee if they were not satisfied, a practice that Special Counsel continues.

Attorneys Per Diem enjoyed the type of exponential growth associated with today's

well as affiliated offices in the United Kingdom.

Special Counsel contributes to Modis Professional Services' growth. The legal staffing company ranks number one in the country in sales and office locations. It counts among its client roster 86 percent of the country's 50 largest law firms and 45 percent of the country's largest corporate legal departments.

Black is clearly a businesswoman who sees the glass as only half-full. She is pursuing other ways to expand the business and emphasizes that

specialties."

"We are full service from the copy room to the courtroom," Black says. "Our growth lies in being a seamless service. If we hire personnel for a project then we take care of all the details from booking their flights, rooms, etc.," she explains.

Despite its growth, Black remains confident that Special Counsel can continue to guarantee its work. No one is ever referred to a client unless the individual has been carefully screened by an account representative. Special Counsel works from a pool of more than 75,000 attorneys and paralegals, whom they value highly. In an era when companies have reduced costs by cutting back on employee benefits, Special Counsel provides medical and dental benefits, paid holidays, direct deposit and a 401k plan.

As an attorney, Black understands the pressures temps labor under on most projects. Noting that most temps' project work is in a "war room," Special Counsel serves as the morale officer, sending care packages, holiday cards and other tokens of recognition. Typically, Special Counsel temps receive bonuses when they complete a major project for large clients. Having staffed projects with as many as 300 people, Black knows that maintaining high morale among temps requires a special touch. In her view, treating temps well is simply good business. More than 90

percent of a temporary service's business comes from repeat customers.

For many of Special Counsel's temps, job assignments offer the flexibility that Black once sought and the opportunity to gain experience. Recent graduates eager to enter the job market can use placements as a way to test different environments and practice areas.

Mark Glickman '89 is a sole practitioner who finds that the ability to work as a temp enables him to buffer slow times. Additionally, he describes some of the jobs he's had as great. "I have worked as the in-house counsel for companies that showed me my office, said 'welcome' and 'go to it.' They gave me tremendous autonomy and were jobs most attorneys would enjoy," he says.

Black recognizes that the type of match Special Counsel made with Glickman and the client is what makes the company successful. She doesn't have to look farther than herself to see what makes a good fit from a business perspective. Special Counsel has blended her interests in law and business. It has also become an enterprise that enables her to see new horizons for the company and pursue them. Like Glickman, the satisfaction comes from someone saying, "Welcome and go to it."

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Internet companies. In 1995, it expanded to Washington, D.C., and Black and Neumann knew they had the potential to expand nationally with more capital. After considering several suitors, they sold their business to AccuStaff, Inc., one of the nation's largest providers of staffing services. AccuStaff also purchased legal temp firms in Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, and merged them into Special Counsel. They tapped Black to be its Chief Executive Officer and President and Neumann as its Chief Operating Officer. In 1996, Special Counsel opened new offices in Cleveland, Boston, Jacksonville and Sacramento. Today, it has offices in 30 cities in the United States, as

Special Counsel has moved beyond just providing legal temps. Its services include: temporary and direct staffing of attorneys, paralegal and legal support staff, project management, trial services and consulting, library management systems, document coding and indexing, paralegal help, support staff help and other services.

There are virtually no practice areas or qualifications that Black would find daunting. "If we get a request for an attorney fluent in Russian with experience in aviation law, it would not be considered unusual. Requests for attorneys who can speak foreign languages are becoming commonplace, as are requests for attorneys with years of experience in arcane